

4816 NORTH BROADWAY
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION
SUBMITTED TO THE
COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS
FEBRUARY, 1989

UPTOWN THEATRE
4816 North Broadway

Architects: Rapp and Rapp

Dates of construction: 1924-25

In 1925, only five years after they opened the 2500-seat Riviera Theatre just one block to the south, Balaban and Katz expressed their faith in the promise of the Uptown entertainment district by opening a second theatre of 4381 seats. The movie exhibition firm was growing rapidly, acquiring existing theatres and building their own. The brothers C. W. and George L. Rapp began designing movie theatres for Balaban and Katz in 1916 and continued through the 1920s, during the years of the movie palace boom, to create the company's new venues. The Uptown neighborhood was becoming a second "downtown," with these and other theatres, and places to dine, drink, and dance. The community had its origins in several lakeside hotels, and hotels would continue to attract transients and residents to the community. Well served by several train lines, the area became a popular destination for Chicagoans and for soldiers and sailors stationed north of the city. The Uptown Theatre offered these potential patrons a few hours in what its operators called "quaint, rich, grand Old Spain," combined with the "smartest and sharpest developments in American ingenuity" to provide an aesthetic experience in climate-controlled comfort.

On opening day, the marquee of the Uptown Theatre announced "one of the great art buildings of the world - an acre of seats in a magic city." The Uptown was the largest theatre in the Balaban and Katz chain when it opened, and neither Balaban and Katz nor Rapp and Rapp ever built anything bigger. The L-shaped site covers most of its block, allowing for entrances on Broadway, Lawrence Avenue, and Magnolia Avenue. Three doorways and vast lobby areas were necessary in order to fill and empty the theatre rapidly several times a day in keeping with the scheduling practices of the time.

The Broadway entrance leads to the grand lobby, culminating in a curving double staircase that leads up to the mezzanine. Just beyond the stair the two subsidiary lobbies begin: the Magnolia Avenue lobby runs along the back of the auditorium, and the Lawrence Avenue lobby extends along the east side of the auditorium.

The architectural style of the Uptown Theatre almost defies description. Although the term "Spanish Baroque" covers much of its decoration, the grand lobby is embellished with heraldic devices and elements of English architecture. The main facade on Broadway, about as tall as an eight-story building, takes the form of an enormous arch of terra-cotta surrounding a four-story window. Across the glass plate of the window are four two-story columns, connected between their capitals by wreaths whose keystones are the classical mask of Comedy. The terra-cotta covering the columns and the flat area of the facade, between the

moldings that frame the window and the piers that define the outer limits of the wall, is molded to resemble tile. Across the top of the facade, three smaller arches, the middle one larger than and rising above the other two, are connected by balustrades and topped with urns. The effect of these shapes and patterns is to suggest a vast gate, particularly inviting at night when light shone through the window and light bulbs outlined the major elements in the facade. The smaller entrances to the theatre are also decorated with terra-cotta, as are the auditorium walls that face directly onto the street, but more sparingly. Light-colored brick, set in a diaper pattern, relieves the vastness of the largely windowless walls above the second-floor level.

Passing through the entranceway of the main facade truly brought patrons into "a magic city." The vast lobbies and the profusion of ornament, leaving no surface untouched and even embellishing the space between surfaces with chandeliers and draperies, overwhelm the visitor. The three-story lobby is lined with an arcade of columns and piers, defining the mezzanine promenade. These columns are ringed at their bases with eagles and covered with shields large and small. At the far end of the lobby is the curving double staircase leading to the mezzanine and second floor.

As seen from the lobby, the second flight of the curving staircase offers a tempting glimpse of the spaces beyond, encouraging patrons to walk up to the balcony level. The landing of the grand staircase at the mezzanine level is wood-panelled, the only example of the use of this material in Rapp and Rapp's work. The ornate architectural fantasies in which they excelled were better rendered in plaster and terra-cotta. From painted ceiling to custom-made carpeting, every aspect of the Uptown Theatre exemplified the lavishness of the movie palace. It was an "art house," as its owners termed their most elaborately furnished theatres. Antique and reproduction furniture lined the lobbies and lounges, the walls of which were hung with paintings. There was so much furniture, in fact, that some of it was soon sent to other theatres. Decorative objects, such as tall Chinese vases on the landing of the grand staircase and Dresden figurines in the ladies' lounge, enhanced the sense of the theatre as a palace created for people of wealth and taste but to which anyone, for a small price, might gain entrance.

The grandeur of the lobby establishes the sense of anticipation for the auditorium. Here, the effect of the decorative detail is augmented by the use of colored lights that could be changed throughout a show to establish changing moods for the stage shows and films that made up the initial programming in the theatre. The auditorium is huge, and like the rest of the building reflects a mix of Spanish and heraldic elements. Three domes, set one inside the other, form the ceiling. The proscenium arch, seventy feet in width and fifty feet in height, and the multi-story organ screens to its left and right are the focus of attention through their design as well as lighting; when it opened, the Uptown had the largest and most sophisticated stage lighting system in the world. Movies and stage shows, including musical presentations and organ recitals, were presented at the Uptown until the late 1930s. A

radio broadcasting room behind the stage allowed the stage programs to be heard beyond the theatre. Until the opening of Radio City Music Hall in New York City in 1932, the Uptown was the largest theatre in the nation, and that fact alone attracted attention and interest.

The Uptown Theatre was the third of the deluxe theatres built by Balaban and Katz. Brothers Barney and A.J. Balaban had begun presenting movies in 1908 in a nickelodeon at Roosevelt Road and Kedzie Avenue in the Near West Side neighborhood in which they had grown up. In 1913, having been joined in their organization by another theatre owner, Sam Katz, they opened their first real theatre, the 1000-seat Circle, also on Roosevelt Road. Three years later, the architects Rapp and Rapp were hired to design a theatre of 2400 seats, the Central Park, also on the West Side. The success of these ventures led Balaban and Katz to the decision to build a large luxury theatre, offering movies and stage shows, in each division of the city. The first was the Tivoli at 63rd Street and Cottage Grove Avenue, opening in February, 1921 (now demolished). The Chicago Theatre opened on State Street in downtown Chicago in October, 1921. Both theatres had approximately 4000 seats, and both were designed in the French style Rapp and Rapp favored. The Uptown Theatre, constructed in 1924-25, was different, their only local use of the architecture of the Spanish Renaissance and Baroque periods.

As the largest theatre ever built by Balaban and Katz and the largest designed by Rapp and Rapp, the Uptown is a testament to the skill of both firms that put them at the pinnacle of the movie presentation business. Balaban and Katz were the premier presenters of movies in Chicago from the 1920s through the 1960s. Their theatres, large and small, were found throughout the city during the heyday of moving-going. For a small price, Chicagoans could be transported to an environment completely removed from their own and experience the latest in popular entertainment. The skill of Rapp and Rapp in providing an aesthetic environment, a comfortable climate, and a smooth traffic flow are nowhere better demonstrated than in the Uptown Theatre. C.W. Rapp described Balaban and Katz's goals for the Uptown in an essay for the Balaban & Katz Magazine:

The outstanding fact about our association with Balaban & Katz has been their one great desire to build for all time...Balaban & Katz theatres are put up to last forever....The public does not know the extra efforts made for their comfort, the additional and unnecessary expense to which Balaban & Katz have gone just to be doubly sure that their theatres would be monuments to Chicago for future generations to look at and revel in...[the Uptown Theatre] is absolutely the last word in modern building, employing scientific engineering in its acoustics, its placing of seats, its eye-command of screen and stage....Art and science when given full sway by builders who are always ready to sacrifice the immediate dollar for the merit and permanence can go far. We feel that the Uptown Theatre is the crowning glory of Balaban & Katz efforts.

He may have been writing about his employers for their company magazine, but given the extent of the relationship between the two firms and the evidence of the theatres themselves, the sincerity of the piece is not in doubt.

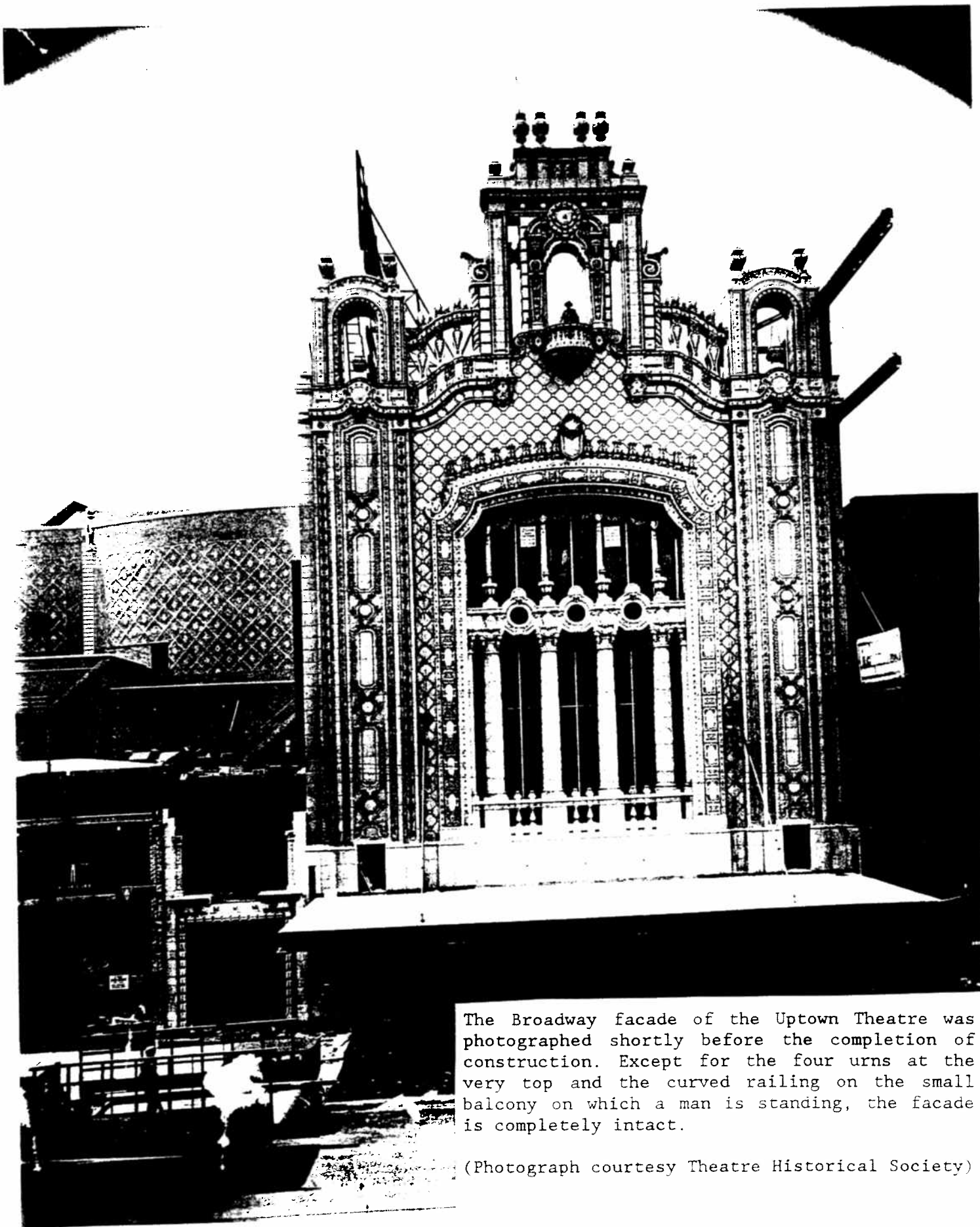
The opening of the Uptown Theatre furthered the entertainment district centered around Broadway and Lawrence Avenue. A year later, the Aragon Ballroom, another Spanish fantasy, opened one block to the east on Lawrence. Next to the theatre, at the corner of Broadway and Lawrence was the Green Mill Lounge which began in 1907 as a roadhouse and later became the Green Mill Gardens. The Uptown Theatre was built on the site of the gardens, but the indoor operations of the saloon continued and prospered as one of the best known night clubs in the city. The popularity of the area stemmed in part from an earlier prohibition restriction on the area just south of Lawrence to Irving Park Road and east of Clark Street. Just west of Broadway at Lawrence is St. Bonifacius Cemetery, and at a time when travelling to a cemetery was a lengthy trip, the corner of Broadway and Lawrence became a convenient place for refreshment. In 1900, the elevated trains from the Loop ran to Wilson Avenue, blocks south of Lawrence; in 1908, the line was extended north to Evanston with a stop at Lawrence. Coming from the north, the North Shore electric interurban train made its first Chicago stop at Lawrence, bringing soldiers from Ft. Sheridan and sailors from Great Lake Naval Station. The proximity to lakefront beaches attracted young people to the area, and boarding houses and hotels proliferated. All these factors made Uptown a very lively place to be in the 1920s through the 1940s.

In 1969, Balaban and Katz sold their chain of theatres, including the Uptown, to the American Broadcasting Company. Most of the furniture, paintings, and decorative objects were sold at that time; the theatre's Wurlitzer organ had previously been removed. Two years later, the chain was sold to Plitt Theatres, Inc., and in 1973, the Uptown Theatre was sold to the first of several individual owners. The theatre has been closed since 1981. Currently, plans are underway to rehabilitate the theater for live performances and for rental by companies or organizations seeking an impressive site for meetings or social functions. At a time when movie theatres are again as small they they were when the movies were new, the Uptown Theatre can yet play a role in entertaining Chicagoans.



The original theatre marquee was replaced in the 1950s with the marquee seen today. Four urns and the small balcony railing are missing, but the facade is otherwise intact.

(Cathy Rocca, photographer, for the Commission on Chicago Landmarks)

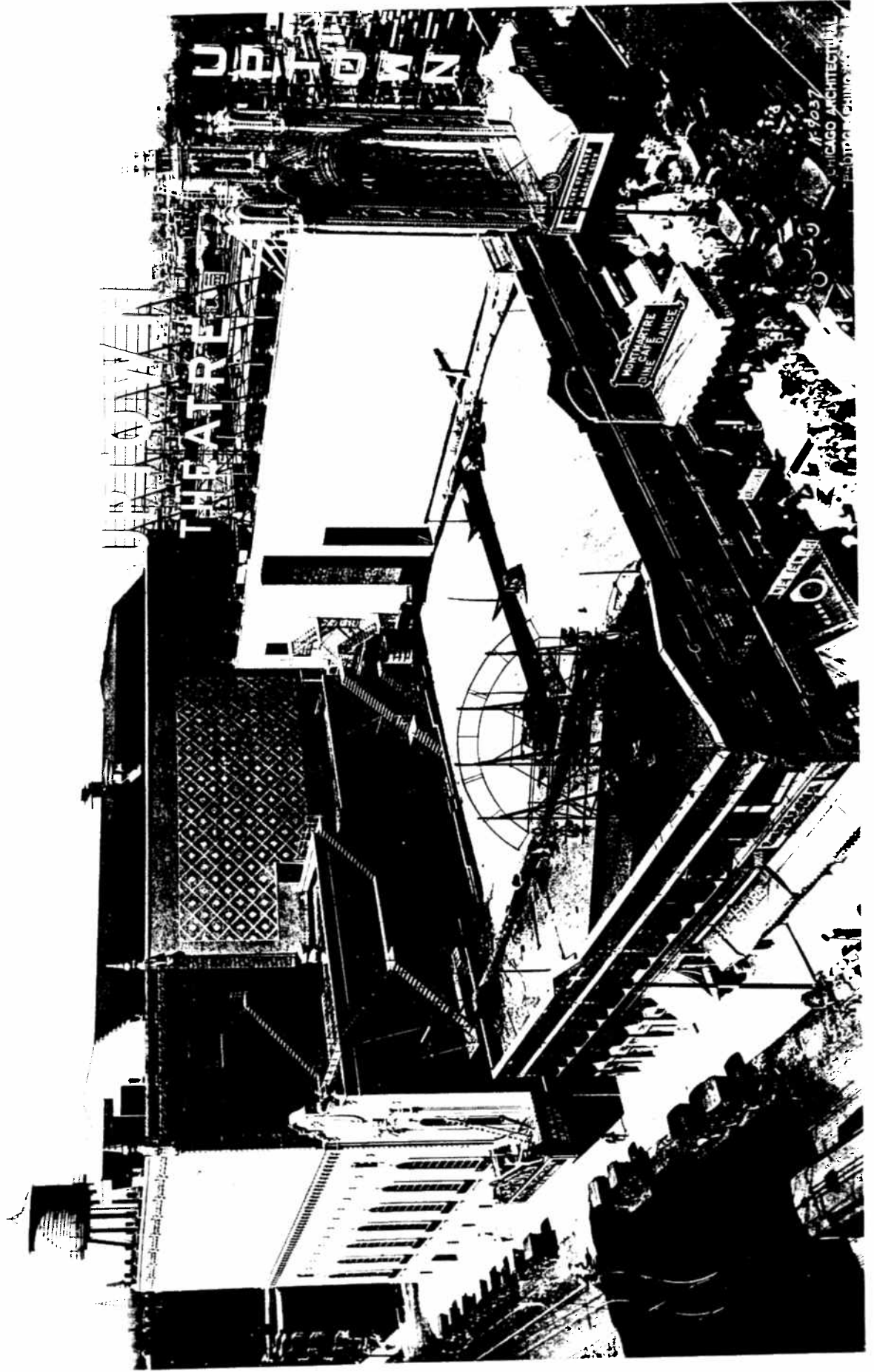


The Broadway facade of the Uptown Theatre was photographed shortly before the completion of construction. Except for the four urns at the very top and the curved railing on the small balcony on which a man is standing, the facade is completely intact.

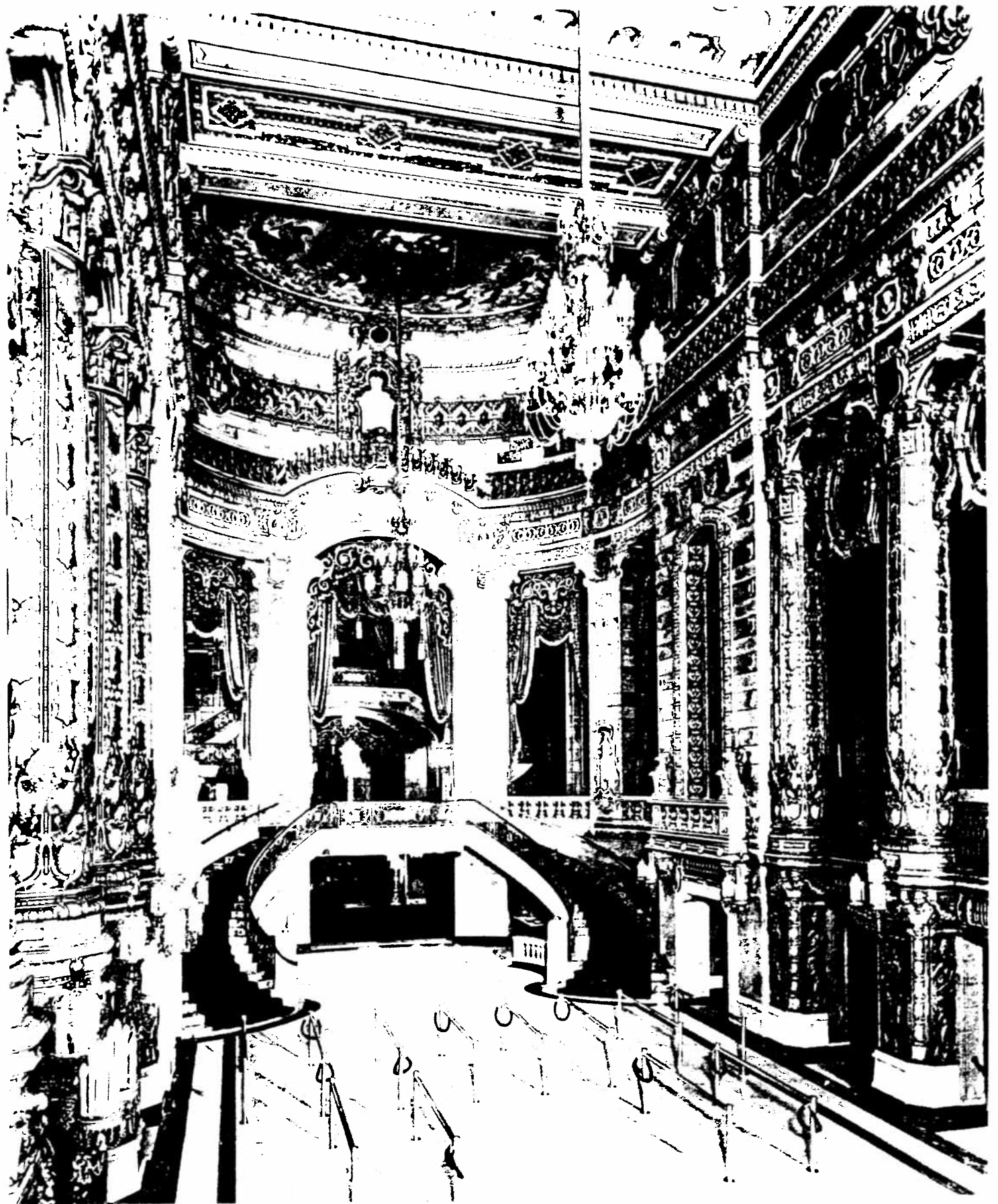
(Photograph courtesy Theatre Historical Society)

The entire Uptown Theatre was photographed, probably during its opening week in August, 1925, from the corner of Broadway and Lawrence Avenue.

(Photograph courtesy Theatre Historical Society)

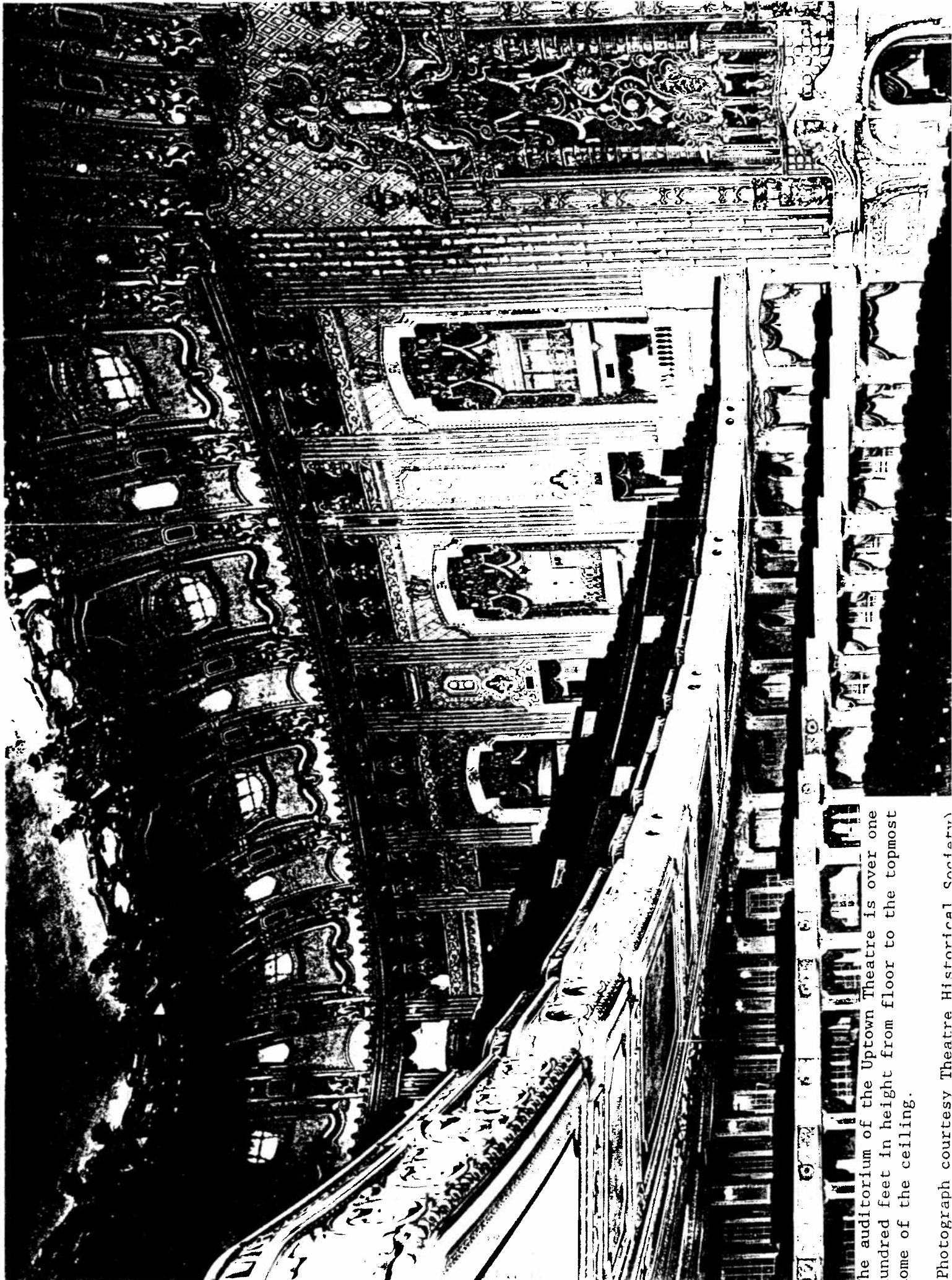


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The grand lobby, seen here shortly after the theatre opened, dazzled patrons with its wealth of detail.

(Photograph courtesy Theatre Historical Society)



The auditorium of the Uptown Theatre is over one hundred feet in height from floor to the topmost dome of the ceiling.

Photograph courtesy Theatre Historical Society

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Other historical and architectural material is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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